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ABSTRACT

Students from grades one through five participated in a study to investigate whether elementary school children stereotype older people and, more specifically, whether they stereotype older people by sex. Photographs of a young woman, a young man, an old woman, and an old man were shown to the subjects, who were then asked to select from each of five pairs of adjectives an adjective that best described the person in the photograph. The subjects were also asked questions about their willingness to associate socially with the persons depicted in the photographs. The results indicated that all subjects selected more negative adjectives to describe the old woman and man than they chose for the young woman and man. The old man also received 20% more negative responses than the old woman. The responses indicated that the girls were as willing to associate with old people as with young people, but the boys were substantially more negative about old people. These results suggest that children do stereotype the elderly. (HTH)

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Sex Stereotyping of the Elderly by Children

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INTRODUCTION

Do you dread growing old because you believe aging will cause you to become unhealthy, dependent and helpless? Do you explain lapses of memory or physical infirmities by saying, "I'm just getting old"? If you do either of these things you may be a victim of the stereotyping that Butler and Lewis(3) refer to as ageism:

> Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereogtyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills.... Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings.

MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES OF THE OLD

As in all other forms of human development there are wide ranges of individual differences in the manner that people age. All the stereotypes of aging are true for some persons, but not for the majority. Butler(2) examines the following misunderstandings about aging which he refers to as myths and stereotypes about the old:

1. <u>The Myth of Aging</u>. This is the idea that by a certain chronological age people become deficient physically, mentally and emotionally. The truth is that there is a greater range from the mean in old age than in any other age group.

2. The Myth of Unproductivity. Many employees face retirement at a certain chronological age. Research indicates, however, that in the absence of disease and social adversities, old people tend to remain productive and actively involved in life.
3. The Myth of Disengagement. There is no evidence to support the theory that older people prefer to disengage from life and to live alone or perhaps only with their peers.
4. The Myth of Inflexibility. One's willingness to change and adapt is more closely related to character than to age. There are conservatives among the elderly, but there are also liberals, radicals and moderates.
5. The Myth of Senility. Senility is a popularized term used to categorize irrational behavior of the old. Irreversible brain damage is a real condition all to often. However, curable conditions, such as anxiety, drepression, and drug abuse are lumped into this diagnostic label, and the elderly do not receive the benefit of reasonable diagnosis and treatment.
6. The Myth of Serenity. This myth errs in the opposite direction from the other myths described. It portrays old age as a kind of adult fairyland. In fact, old age has more stress than any other age. We need to recognize

the presence of these stresses and make provisions for the elderly to cope with them.

Evidently, such views of the elderly are prevalent. McTavish(5) in reviewing more than 300 research views of the elderly concluded that the media generally inform us that "old people are generally ill, tired, not sexually interested, mentally slower, forgetful and less able to learn new things, grouchy, withdrawn, feeling sorry for themselves, less likely to participate in activities (except for religion), isolated in the least happy or fortunate time of life, unproductive and deficient in various combinations and with varying emphasis."

Research concerned with children's views of the elderly generally reinforces the stereotypes of society in general. In a carefully controlled study Jantz, Seefeldt, Galpher and Serlock(4) concluded that children's attitudes toward the elderly are complex and mixed. Children apparently have limited contact and interaction with older persons. In general, children express positive affective feelings toward the elderly, but have negative attitudes about the physical aspects associated with the elderly and about growing old themselves.

In a study that encouraged fifth graders to study ageing Storey (7) allowed pupils to read books with elderly characters and describe the way the characters were presented. The responses of the fifth grader are as follows:

1. The grandparents in the books looked older than own.

2. The book elderly and grandparents didn't work, have fun or do anything exciting.
3. The book elderly had sad, lonely and boring lives.
4. The book young people were mean to the elderly, as if they were stupid and as if they were children.
5. Characters in the books did not seem to want to listen or talk to the elderly.
6. Sometimes the book elderly were mean, crabby, overly tidy, fussy and unfair.
7. Book elderly liked to remember the good old days or dream of better times.
8. There were not many happy books about the elderly.

In another study Storey(6) provides examples of stereotypes and negative images of the elderly in children's literature, as reported in research investigations:

1. Elderly people are depicted as inactive, or are shown as engaging in housework, fishing, walking, listening or storytelling.
2. Such adjectives and adverbs as "old", "wrinkled," "crippled," "babbling," "mean," and "crabby are used in referring to the elderly.
3. White hair and bent-over bodies typify the physical characteristics ascribed to the elderly.

In an extensive analysis of ageism in children's books Ansello(1) found that only 16.46 percent contained any older character. Of the older characters that were included only 17.9 percent were principal characters. More than half the time no occupation was shown for old characters. Of more than 22,000 illustrations less than 1 percent show older characters alone. The adjective old accounts for three-fourths of all physical descriptions of aged characters in the books included in the study.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Research evidence indicates that media do stereotype the elderly. The evidence also suggests that children do recognize that the elderly are stereotyped by the media. It was the purpose of this study to investigate generally whether children's attitudes toward the elderly are stereotyped and specifically whether the attitudes are stereotyped by sex.

PROCEDURES

Two classes were selected at random from each grade level in an elementary school with four classes at each grade level. Figure 1 shows the composition of the sample used in this study.

Figure 1

Composition of Sample			
Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
1	38	40	78
2	37	42	79
3	39	41	80
4	25	27	52
5	27	25	52
	166	175	341

Each pupil was interviewed individually by the investigator. The interview involved showing a picture of a young man (age range 22-28) an old man (age range 60+) a young woman (age range 20-28) and an old woman (age 60+) to each subject. While subjects were looking at the picture, the investigator asked the subject to tell whether the person in the picture is sick or healthy, ugly or pretty, rich or poor, happy or sad, friendly or unfriendly.

The investigator then asked each subject the following questions to which the subjects were asked to respond "yes" or "no".

1. If you saw this person on the street, would you say "Hello" to him/her?
2. Would you want this person to be your friend?
3. Would you want this person to watch you play?
4. Would you like to sit next to this person on a bus?
5. Would you like to visit with this person?
6. Would you like this person to help your teacher?

Prior to the investigation answer sheets were prepared so that the answers could be recorded in a systematic fashion by the subjects and be tabulated accurately by the investigator.

FINDINGS

An examination of the responses indicated no observable trends for individual adjectives or questions so the decision was made to combine all the favorable responses into one group and all the unfavorable responses into another group. Such a procedure precluded

the use of statistical tests to determine significance, but provided a means for demonstrating obvious tendencies through the use of percentages.

Table I presents the number of positive and negative adjectives that pupils associated with each of the four photographs.

TABLE I

Adjectives

	young woman				old woman				young man				old man			
	+		-		+		-		+		-		+		-	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Girls	471	80	111	20	245	42	340	58	544	91	53	9	94	16	493	84
Boys	411	81	97	19	157	31	356	69	466	87	69	13	97	19	413	81
Total	882	81	208	19	402	37	696	63	1010	89	122	11	191	17	926	83

Positive adjectives chosen for each photograph are reported below "+" by frequency and percentage. Negative adjectives are reported below "-". Girls', boys', total responses are reported separately.

Total responses indicate that 81 and 89 percent of the responses for the young woman and young man respectively were positive. Conversely, 63 and 83 percent of the responses for the old woman and old man respectively were negative. Data indicated that all subjects tended to respond more negatively to photographs of old than young persons. There were 20% more negative adjectives associated with the

old man than with the old woman in the responses of both boys and girls. The conclusions are that both boys and girls described old people with more unfavorable adjectives than they described young people. The old man was described in a less favorable light than the old woman. Pupils may stereotype old men less favorably than old women.

The questions asked by the investigator were designed to elicit the willingness of the subjects to associate with the persons depicted in the photographs. Table II presents the responses to these questions.

TABLE II

Questions

	young woman				old woman				young man				old man			
	+		-		+		-		+		-		+		-	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Girls	447	62	273	38	318	49	327	51	539	74	191	26	264	53	233	47
Boys	334	60	226	40	147	26	421	74	331	56	263	44	132	24	415	76
Total	781	61	499	39	465	38	748	62	870	66	454	34	396	38	648	62

Questions about the young woman and young man received positive responses of 61 and 66 percent respectively. Questions about the old woman and old man each received 62 percent negative responses so there is no difference in the attitudes of subjects with regard to the sex of the old people. However, there was a substantially higher frequency of negative responses by boys than girls to both photographs of older

people. Negative responses to questions regarding the old woman were 74 percent by boys and 51 percent by girls. For the old man the negative responses were 76 percent by boys and 47 percent by girls.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether elementary pupils stereotype older people and, more specifically, whether they stereotype them by sex.

Photographs of a young woman and man and an old woman and man were shown to the subjects. Subjects were then asked to select the adjective from each of five pairs of adjectives which best described the person, such as happy-sad. Then subjects were asked six questions designed to assess their willingness to associate socially with the persons depicted in the photographs.

The data indicated that all subjects selected more negative adjectives to describe the old woman and man than the young woman and man. The old man received 20 percent more negative responses than the old woman. This finding suggests a need for additional research to investigate whether children generally would describe old men less favorably than they describe old women.

Responses to the questions indicated that girls were as willing to associate with the old people as the younger people depicted in the photograph. However, the boys were substantially more negative about old people of both sexes. The implication that

the girls are more willing than the boys in this study to associate with the elderly. Additional research is needed to provide more information regarding the willingness of young people to associate with the elderly.

This investigation makes relatively clear the fact that children do stereotype characteristics that they associate with the elderly. Girls, however, seem just as willing to associate with the elderly as with younger people. Boys are substantially more willing to associate with the younger than with older persons depicted in the photographs.

More research is needed to ascertain whether girls generally are more willing than boys to associate with the elderly and, if so, why.

The problem of stereotyping of the elderly by children needs to be addressed by educators for two major reasons. Elderly persons suffer from being viewed as inferior. Younger persons suffer because stereotyping of the elderly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who view the elderly as inferior, consider themselves to be inferior as they become elderly. Considering ourselves or others, to be inferior is detrimental to the development of our maximum potential.

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